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ON THE RELATIVE DIFFICULTIES OF DEPICTING HEAVEN AND HELL IN MUSIC

By CARL VAN VECHTEN

BEGINNING with the eighteenth century and extending down through our own time heaven and hell have exerted a powerful sway over the imagination of the musician. It would seem, indeed, that the most abstract of the arts could express to us more satisfactorily than poetry, painting, or sculpture the symbolism inherent in the names of these post-death kingdoms. Heaven suggests goodness, nobility, sublimity, glory, simple faith, aspiration, charity, brotherly love, and, in the minds of composers, perhaps because of the mistranslation of the names of obscure Hebrew instruments of which we have no pictorial conception, these qualities are best expressed concretely by means of harps and trumpets. Hell, on the other hand, which suggests vice, ugliness, deceit, and defeat, is generally associated with snarling bassoons and rattling drums. Curiously enough, although there can be nothing inherently wicked about music, it is often with hell rather than heaven that composers have achieved their best effects, and the noblest music is not specifically concerned with paradise. The symphony in C minor, of which it is unnecessary to name the composer, Schubert's symphony in C major, which has only been associated with heaven through Schumann's adjectival comment, *Or sai chi l'onore*, and the final scene of *Die Walküre*, were all no doubt inspired by God in the truest religious sense, but the composers were making no attempt to picture to us the streets of pearl, the mighty chryselephantine throne, or the winged supernaturals who are said to play harps in the air.

A real heaven in opera or tone-poem is quite likely to remind a musician of the key of C major, the tonic and the dominant, and the diatonic scale, whereas hell and the devil seem to insist on five or six sharps or flats, esoteric scales, and a dædal disregard for exoteric rhythms. The conclusion of the second act of *Hänsel und Gretel* furnishes us with an excellent typical example of what usually happens in music when a real heaven is turned on. Humperdinck here is satisfied, with the aid of transparencies, colored

lights, and stately-tripping angels bearing gilded palm leaves, to transfigure and glorify a tune which suggests a Protestant Sunday School and which dramatically is probably quite in keeping with the Protestant Sunday School ideas of the two babes in the forest. However, it may be said, with its unimaginative succession of tonic and dominant chords and plentiful arpeggios, to represent one of the weakest moments in the score. Arpeggios, by the way, are seemingly an essential accompaniment to anything heavenly. It is not alone Little Eva who expires to them; even Richard Strauss reverted to them for his balefully banal heaven music in his tone-poem, *Death and Transfiguration*, an episode which sends some of us away from the concert-hall fully determined never to do good in this world for fear we may be consigned to listen to such vapid music all our immortal lives.

Heaven indeed must be a very dull place to inspire such saccharine chords from the composer of the acescent and biting *Elektra*. Again in *The Legend of Joseph* an angel steps our way to a tune which suggests that Strauss is not at his best when thinking of heaven. Nor is Mascagni, who in *Iris* introduces us to a Japanese paradise, *via* a lotus-flower route, much more successful. For the naïve simplicities of *The Creation* and for the thundering God-fearing music of *The Messiah* I have more sympathy, and of all heavenly music I do not think better exists than the *Dance of the Angels* in Wolf-Ferrari's *Vita Nuova*. There is a test for great art, and you may apply this test equally to Paul Verlaine or Shakespeare, in that it treats of the sublime with simplicity and the simple with sublimity. This minuet, scored for harps, piano, and kettledrums, bringing up to mind a divine fresco of pre-Raphælite angels, of daisy besprinkled green fields, of deep blue skies, of lakes of still deeper blue, circled by ilexes and cypresses, is indeed celestial in its simplicity, as poignant a simplicity as that of one of the poems of "Sagesse." It reflects the simple faith of its composer and it begets faith in its listeners. Gluck, too, knew the secret; Gluck, above all others, knew the secret, but Gluck was inspired by the pagan heaven of the Greeks, a more beautiful ideal than the heaven of the Christians. In all opera I cannot recall a more simple, a more touchingly serene page than the music of the scene of the Elysian Fields in *Orfeo*. The first and unbelievably lovely dance of the happy spirits in F major, "which," Vernon Lee assures us in "Orpheus in Rome," one of the most mood-compelling of her essays, "seems, in its even flow, to carry the soul, upon some reedy, willowy stream, into the heart of the land of the happy dead," is immediately followed

by an exquisite flute melody, to which, if we are not disturbed by the action on the stage (and it is often well to cover one's eyes), we may imagine the filmiest of sylphs floating lazily through the ether. The song of the Happy Shade enhances the mood and even the entrance of Orpheus does not break the spell which continues to hold us in its power until the descending curtain shuts from our ears the divine chorus which ends the scene. The singing of no Christian angels can ever compensate for this lovely pagan choir. The scene of the furies exhibits Gluck's talent in demoniacism. How persistently they scamper and riot! How tremendous is their marmorean and terrible No! This naïve but substantial canvas suggests Orcagna's fresco, *The Triumph of Death*, in the Campo Santo at Pisa much more definitely than Liszt's *Todtentanz*, which is intended as a musical transmutation of the picture.

In the music of Gluck we are assuredly near the heart of true beauty, which, after all, may be the real God, the real heavenly kingdom. Ideas differ, however. In 1665 Fr. Arnoulx, canon of the cathedral of Riez in Provence, published at Rouen a book, now very rare, entitled, "Du Paradis et de ses merveilles, où est amplement traicté de la félicité éternelle et de ses joyes." After describing what can be seen in heaven he turns to the pleasures of the ear:

If the glory of the picture is all that one can desire, also the ear is charmed by melodious music, pleasant harmony, gentle murmurings, soft and beautiful voices. There is a director; there are singers and musicians in abundance; there are thousands of millions of beautiful voices which sing in harmony, observing very perfectly all the rules of music. The director is Jesus Christ; the singers are the angels, the blessed, happy angels. There are three bands of angels and each of them is divided into three choirs: the Cherubim, the Seraphim, and the Thrones sing soprano; the Dominations and the Principalities sing alto; the Powers and the Virtues sing tenor; the archangels and the angels in the lowest choirs sing bass; even the saints come to sing with these. Jesus Christ gives the key to all and intones the motet, which is new. With this celestial music and so many melodious voices of different kinds there is yet, for the entire perfection of the scale, the sound of the harp, of the flute, of viols, of the spinet, of the lute, and all other kinds of instruments which marvelously tickle the delicacy of our ears.

Music of hell is usually associated with the devil. Once even, it is related, on the authority of a composer, the devil himself wrote a tune; this is Tartini's *Devil's Trill Sonata*, which violinists often play to this day. M. Lalande, in his "Voyage d'un François en Italie," tells the story, which he says he had

directly from Tartini, and Dr. Burney repeats it. Michael Kelly informs us, in memoirs which are not entirely to be relied on in other respects, that Nardini, a pupil of Tartini, assured him that the story was correct in every detail. One night in the year 1713, it seems, Tartini dreamed that he had made a contract with the devil, who promised to be at his service on all occasions; indeed, in the dream the musician's new servant anticipated all his wishes and fully satisfied his desires. Ultimately the two became so familiar that Tartini presented the fiend with his violin in order to ascertain what kind of musician he was; when, to Tartini's astonishment, he heard him play an air, so beautiful in itself and performed with such taste and skill that it surpassed all the music he had ever heard in his life. Tartini awoke in a state of feverish excitement and delight, and seized his fiddle in the hope of repeating the music he had just heard, but the archenemy had gone and his music with him! Nevertheless Tartini took pen and music-paper and immediately composed the sonata which bears the devil's name. It is the best of Tartini's works, but so far inferior has its composer declared it to be to the music which he heard in his dream, that he said he would have smashed his instrument and abandoned music for the rest of his life could he have subsisted by any other means.

It was thoughtful of the devil to write this sonata in the style of the eighteenth century. What if it had occurred to him to dash off Leo Ornstein's sonata, opus 31? Could Tartini have remembered the notes and put them down? I doubt it. As it is, we have Tartini's word for the fact that the music as performed was infinitely more extraordinary than his transcription of it. Memory is treacherous at best and to remember a whole sonata, taking in at the same time the virtuosity of the devil and the glamor of his presence, which must have shared interest with his playing, must be adjudged a remarkable feat. Broad, sweeping, sensuous melodies and rapid, dashing cascades of notes, to be played with devilish abandon, alternate in this music. If Tolstoy had been more familiar with musical literature he would have found this composition more to his purpose than the harmless *Kreutzer Sonata*. In one section the leading notes are trilled; hence probably the title. Also the violinist is given an opportunity in the cadenza to trill to his bow's content. The work is difficult and we are forced to the conclusion that the devil must have been an exceptionally fine fiddler.

In 1858-9 Liszt composed two orchestral paraphrases of episodes from the "Faust" of Nicolaus Lenau and in the second

of these, *The Dance in the Village Tavern*, more commonly known as the *Mephisto Waltz*, the devil plays the violin, while Faust, in sensuous excitement, waltzes away with a black-eyed peasant girl. John Sullivan Dwight, once a prominent Boston critic, held that this music was "positively devilish, simply diabolical. . . it shuts out every ray of light and heaven, from whence music sprang." Perhaps the spirit of ataraxy is in the air; at any rate to-day we can listen to this piece without trembling. When the devil played the fiddle, Philip Hale assures us, his bowing was so vigorous that the dancers kept on dancing until they died. Miss Jeannette d'Abadie saw Mrs. Martibalsarena dance with four frogs at the same time at a Sabbath personally conducted by Satan, who played in an extraordinarily wild fashion. His favorite instrument was the fiddle, but he occasionally performed on the bagpipe. The good monk Abraham à Sancta-Clara, according to Mr. Hale, once meditated on the devil's taste in musical instruments:

Does he prefer the harp? Surely not, for it was by the harp that he was driven from the body of Saul. A trumpet? No, for the brilliant tones of the trumpet have many times dispersed the enemies of the Lord. A tambourine? Ah no, for Miriam the sister of Aaron, after Pharaoh and his host were drowned in the Red Sea, took a tambourine in her hand and with all the women about her praised and thanked God. A fiddle? No, indeed, for with a fiddle an angel rejoiced the heart of St. Francis. I do not wish to abuse the patience of the reader, and so I say nothing is more agreeable to Satan for accompaniment to the dance than the ancient pagan lyre.

Rubinstein's orchestral poem *Faust* seems to lack reference to the devil, but in his opera, *The Demon*, which until recently, at least, has remained popular in Russia, he drew a full length portrait of the tempter. There are minor glimpses of hell in *Der Freischütz* and *Robert le Diable*; Massenet in *Griséldis* turned his attention to a bourgeois, boisterous, gothic gargoyle kind of devil, a devil with a wife, which he limned with no little humor. The most important air of this amusing apparition is called, *Loin de sa femme!* It is principally, however, with the *Faust* legend, which has intrigued composers for considerably over a century, that musicians have gone to hell. Many of these operas, symphonies and overtures have disappeared and only musical dictionaries and white-haired gatherers of statistics remind us that they once existed. Even much of the incidental music composed to be performed with Goethe's tragedy has fallen into oblivion. The very names of Radziwill, Lindpaintner, Béaucourt, de

Peelært, Porphire-Désiré Hennebert, F. de Roda, Rietz, Henry Rowley Bishop, Louise Angélique Bertin, Heinrich Zöllner, Lickl, Karl Eberwein, Louis Schlösser, Eduard Lassen, and L. Gordigiani have faded away. We do remember Schumann, but who knows his *Faust* music maugre Mr. Newman's earnest praise. Spohr's *Faust*, too, is forgotten, Spohr of whom W. H. Hadow has said, "His whole conception of the art is soft and voluptuous, his Heaven is a Garden of Atlantis, and even his Judgement-day is iridescent." Weber might have written a *Faust*. When he was engaged to write an opera for London he was given a choice of that subject or *Oberon*. He chose the latter. Wagner's *Eine Faust-Ouvertüre* is not played as frequently as the prelude to *Die Meistersinger*, but there are probably few concert-goers who have not heard it. Felix Weingartner's incidental music for Goethe's play was performed at Weimar in 1908. More recently a young Frenchwoman, Lili Boulanger, who died before she achieved a style, set a scene from the second part of Goethe's "Faust" to music and called the result a cantata, but her devil is bedecked with Wagnerian harmonies and melodies. Liszt's *Faust Symphony* is certainly with us both in spirit and flesh. The third movement is devoted to Mephistopheles. Ernest Newman says that this

section is particularly ingenious. It consists, for the most part, of a kind of burlesque upon the subjects of the *Faust*, which are here passed, as it were, through a continuous fire of irony and ridicule. This is a far more effective way of depicting 'the spirit of denial' than making him mouth a farrago of pantomime bombast, in the manner of Boito. The being who exists, for the purposes of the drama, only in antagonism to Faust, whose main activity consists only in endeavouring to frustrate every good impulse of Faust's soul, is really best dealt with, in music, not as a positive individuality, but as the embodiment of negation—a malicious, saturnine parody of all the good that has gone to the making of Faust. The *Mephistopheles* is not only a piece of diabolically clever music, but the best picture we have of a character that in the hands of the average musician becomes either stupid, or vulgar, or both. As we listen to Liszt's music, we feel that we really have the Mephistopheles of Goethe's drama.

Mr. Apthorp says:

One may suspect the composer of taking Mephisto's 'Ich bin der Geist der stets verneint' for the motto of this movement;

and James Huneker tells us that

in the Mephistopheles Liszt appears in his most characteristic pose—Abbé's robe tucked up, Pan's hoofs showing, and the air charged with cynical

mockeries and travesties of sacred love and ideals (themes are topsy-turvièd à la Berlioz).

At the present day we occasionally hear three *Faust* operas and often two. Boito, after his prologue in which Mefistofele challenges the heavenly hosts, ventures no nearer heaven than the classical Sabbath scene in which Faust meets Helena in a sort of Italianate duet. To me this is the unbearable episode of this lyric drama. The scene in which Mefistofele twirls the globe in his palm while his brazen and craven cohorts circle and chortle around him is very effective, but when Chaliapine appears as the spirit which denies it is a matter for doubt whether it is the Russian bass or Boito who makes the effect. And certainly Margherita's death in prison remains the best scene in the opera. Berlioz in his "dramatic legend" is nearest hell in the *Song of the Flea*, an excellent piece of sardonic ribaldry, although the ride with its ghastly accentuated horse-hoofs beating up from the orchestra is very wonderful. But Ernest Newman thinks that Berlioz's devil is the only operatic Mephistopheles that carries conviction:

He never, even for a moment, suggests the inanely grotesque figure of the pantomime. Of malicious, saturnine devilry there is plenty in him; no one, except Liszt, could compete with Berlioz on this ground. But there is more than this in the character. In such scenes as that on the banks of the Elbe, where he lulls Faust to sleep, there is a real suggestion of power, of dominion over ordinary things, that takes Mephistopheles out of the category of the merely theatrical and puts him in that of the philosophical.

Marguerite's glorification is a forgettable passage just as Gounod's attempt at the translation of Marguerite is the weakest point in his score, but as no one nowadays ever ventures to sit an opera through, it was perhaps clever of Gounod to put his heaven scene last, so that only the ushers and stage-hands might hear it before they extinguish the lights in the theatre. Nevertheless, you will probably remember the episode with its white-winged supernumeraries rising above the housetops to arpeggio chords and a silly chant;—not even the perfumed sanctity we have the right to expect of a modern French composer.

Faust, it seems to me, of all conceivable operatic subjects, cries out for collaborators. It is unfortunate that César Franck is dead, because I think that the Belgian composer and Igor Stravinsky together might have evolved something extraordinary. For César Franck came nearer to expressing aspiration and vague longing in his mystic music than perhaps any other composer. It is not alone the *Rédemption* and the *Béatitudes* that shine in

blessed light. The D minor symphony is to me the finest expression of simple sublimity to be found in all music. This haunting reticulation of tones aspires and even reaches beyond aspiration. The terrible first movement warns us of the Judgement Day and then in melting human tones forgives us our sins. The allegretto is like a graceful dance of angels, the angels of Benozzo Gozzoli, clad in robes of mulberry and lilac sewn with threads of gold and silver, their halos glistening in a blue light, itself impregnated with golden dust, while the hautboys and harps ravish our ears and the soaring violins give ample promise of the glory of the heavenly choirs. Santa Teresa would have loved this music, music mystic and beneficent at the same time, not the mysticism tinged with chypre and verveine and essence of bergamot which makes Debussy's music a powerful stimulant to jaded nerves. César Franck could have realized the simple purity of Marguerite and he would have carried her triumphantly, gloriously, magnificently through vague Gothic arches of tone which would have burst the boundaries of any singing theatre and transported us perforce to Amiens or Chartres.

But Papa Franck could never have managed the hell scenes of *Faust*. He would have made of Abaddon a truly epicene kingdom, frequented by bardashes and catamites. No, for hell we should turn to Stravinsky—and what a dashing, erratic, spontaneous, discordant devil we might expect from him! A devil in quintuple and sextuple rhythms, a devil cap-a-pie with triplets in sixteenths, and figurations after the worst manner of sheol, a delightful, insinuating, firefly, nervous marvelous fellow of a fiend with piccolos, flutes, clarinets, hautboys, bassoons, French horns, and celestas at his beck and call, a Zaniel with nerve-wracking glissandos on the violins and deep passionate long-bowed mocking viola notes at his command, Beelzebub with a shower of shuddering octaves and a flood of discordant tenths, an Apollyon who could sing bass and tenor and a little falsetto, in fact a regular bing-bang-boom hell of a devil in the best Russian Ballet manner!

Now a Stravinsky devil played against a César Franck heaven would make a *Faust* that would keep the oldest subscriber to the Opera awake, and would effectually destroy all hope for the future of Hun music even in Germany. Even old Nietzsche, could he hear it, would be delighted with this nexus of mysticism and nervous energy, this combat of the life-force with the spirit of God!